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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: UNMEE PUSHES FOR CONTINUATION OF MISSION

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) Deputy Special Representative Ambassador Azouz Ennifar briefed representatives of permanent members of the United Nations Security Council September 12 on the status of the mission's downsizing efforts and recommended an extension of UNMEE's mandate. Ennifar said the situation in the temporary security zone (TSZ) has remained "calm, but tense" with no immediate risk of conflict; however the regional situation "calls for maintaining UNMEE." Ennifar cited the U.S. initiative to begin parallel talks on normalization and demarcation as worthy of support and called on the international community at large to keep pushing both sides towards resolving. End Summary.

SAME JOB, FEWER PEOPLE

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador Ennifar informed to the Charge and other diplomatic envoys September 12 that UNMEE completed the mandated downsizing of its personnel from 3,300 to 2,300 as of August 15. Ennifar said that UNMEE's new operating plan has not affected its overall monitoring capacity. The UNMEE force today is primarily comprised of an equal balance of Indians and Jordanians with a smaller Kenyan contingent working on engineering and demining projects. Since the helicopter ban and ground restrictions imposed by Eritrea, Ennifar estimated that UNMEE monitors 40 percent of the border concentration on the western and central sectors.

¶3. (SBU) Ennifar characterized the situation in the TSZ as "calm, but tense." UNMEE sees routine troop movements but has not observed any signs of heavy equipment movement. Ethiopia is largely "transparent" about its troop movements, but Eritrea provides little information to UNMEE. Both sides are in a defensive posture, and Ennifar stated that there was "no risk of conflict." He attributed this to UNMEE's presence and recommended that the UNSC renew its mandate at the current staffing levels. In fact, he stated, the regional situation (instability in Sudan and Somalia) calls for maintaining UNMEE.

LOOKING TO INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY FOR SOLUTIONS

¶4. (SBU) Ennifar emphasized that UNMEE's mission is not to demarcate the border but to monitor the TSZ, which it is doing successfully despite restrictions imposed by Eritrea.

Ennifar acknowledged that neither side is currently willing to meet under EEBC auspices. He cited the U.S. initiative to begin parallel talks on normalization and demarcation as a possible way forward seemingly stalled. Ennifar noted that the international community would need to pressure both Eritrea and Ethiopia to move forward on any solution to break the stalemate. Ennifar cited his participation in the Military Coordination Commission (established under the Algiers Agreement) in Nairobi where he observed positive attitudes, exchange of information, and a dedication to renewed cooperation between the two sides.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: Core country team believes that maintaining UNMEE in its present configuration (even in its reduced constrained posture) provides the necessary eyes and ears on the ground for an early warning of any changes along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border. The threat of a proxy war in Somalia, possibly combined with a new Eritrean offensive along the border with Ethiopia, also argues for continued UNMEE monitoring in the north. Eritrean perceptions of Ethiopian internal instability may further increase the risk of renewed armed conflict. End Comment.

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